

I keep closing my eyes but I can't block you out

Est

"I'm learning to let go, learning to be kind to myself."

The week had passed like water through open fingers—quick, fluid, impossible to hold onto but leaving traces of itself behind.

I barely noticed the days slipping by, which was itself a kind of miracle. For months, time had moved like honey in winter—thick and slow, every hour stretching into eternity when you were waiting for a text that never came, replaying conversations that led nowhere, cataloging all the ways you'd failed to be enough. But this week? This week had been different.

Monday had been meetings. Tuesday, more meetings and a fitting session with the models. Wednesday was therapy. Thursday, test shots in the studio to finalize lighting setups. And somewhere in between all of it—scattered like confetti across the calendar—there had been dinners and shopping trips and the simple, ordinary business of living a life that wasn't consumed by heartbreak.

I'd even gone to the hairdresser.

It sounds small, Trivial. The kind of thing that doesn't deserve mention in the narrative of someone's recovery. But I couldn't remember the last time I'd sat in that chair, let someone fuss over my hair, made small talk about nothing important while scissors snipped and products were applied. Months, probably. Maybe longer. When you're in the depths of obsession, when every waking thought is bent toward someone who can't love you back, self-care becomes an afterthought. You eat when you remember to. You shower because you have to. You wear whatever's clean enough to pass.

But last week, I'd made an appointment. I'd shown up on time. I'd let them cut and style and do whatever magic hairdressers do, and I'd walked out feeling like a person who was worth the effort.

Progress. Small, fragile, but real.

The therapy session had been Wednesday afternoon.

I'd walked into Dr. Siriporn's office with the same flutter of anxiety I always felt—the particular nervousness of someone about to expose their vulnerabilities to a professional stranger. But it was getting easier. Three sessions in, and I was starting to understand the rhythm of it. The way she'd ask open questions and then wait, patient and unhurried, for whatever truth decided to surface.

This time, I'd talked about William.

Not the disaster. Not the breakdown. Not the vomiting or the desperate voicemails or the way I'd made a complete fool of myself in his hallway. We'd touched on those things before, in fragments and references. But this session was different.

This session was about letting go.

"You're allowed to set boundaries," Dr. Siriporn had said, her voice carrying that particular quality I'd come to recognize—direct but kind, firm but warm. "You're allowed to protect yourself from people who hurt you, even if they didn't mean to hurt you. Even if their harm came from their own pain." I'd sat with those words, turning them over in my mind like smooth stones.

"I feel guilty," I'd admitted. "Like I should be there for him. Like walking away makes me the bad guy."

"Why?"

Such a simple question. Such a complicated answer.

"Because he's struggling. Because he needs help. Because..." I'd trailed off, searching for the real reason underneath all the surface excuses. "Because I thought if I just loved him hard enough, I could fix him. And if I stop trying, doesn't that mean I failed?"

Dr. Siriporn had looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite read—something between compassion and the particular patience of someone who'd heard variations of this story a thousand times before.

"You're not responsible for fixing anyone, Est. That's not what love is. That's not what relationships are. You can care about someone and still recognize that being close to them is harmful to you. Those two things can coexist."

"It doesn't feel like they can."

"I know." She'd leaned forward slightly, her presence grounding in the quiet room. "But here's what I want you to consider: every moment you spend trying to save someone who isn't ready to be saved is a moment you're not spending on yourself. On your healing. On building a life that doesn't revolve around another person's crisis."

The words had landed somewhere deep—not like a blow, but like a key turning in a lock I hadn't known was there.

"You're not abandoning him by choosing yourself," she'd continued. "You're just finally putting your own oxygen mask on first."

I'd thought about that a lot since Wednesday. The oxygen mask metaphor. The idea that self-preservation wasn't selfish, that walking away from something harmful

wasn't failure. It was still settling into my bones, still working its way through the layers of guilt and obligation I'd wrapped around myself for years.

But it was there. A new thought. A different way of seeing.

Dr. Siriporn reminded me of Tui's mother, in some ways. Not my own mother—never my own mother, whose love had always come with conditions and corrections and the particular coldness of someone more concerned with appearances than with the person standing in front of her. No, Dr. Siriporn was like the mother I'd glimpsed in phone calls and stories, the one who lived in a village somewhere and still fussed over her adult son, still asked if he was eating, still worried about his happiness while respecting his choices.

Direct but kind. Firm but warm. The way a mother should be.

I was paying for that kind of care now, which felt strange and also exactly right. Paying someone to mother me, in a sense. To offer the unconditional support and gentle guidance that had been missing from my childhood. It was a transaction, yes—professional, boundaried, contained within the walls of her office. But the healing it was offering felt real enough to be worth every baht.

The improved income had been unexpected. Not the fact of it—I'd known the makeup campaign paid well, had seen the numbers on the contract and done the math in my head. What surprised me was what it meant in practice. The breathing room. The absence of that constant, low-grade financial anxiety that had hummed beneath everything for so long.

Before the campaign, I'd been taking every job I could find. Restaurant shoots and café openings and influencer content and whatever else paid enough to keep the lights on. I'd told myself it was about building my portfolio, about staying busy, about not giving myself time to think. But really, it had been about survival—both financial and emotional. If I worked enough hours, I wouldn't have time to cry. If I exhausted myself completely, I'd fall asleep instead of lying awake wondering what I'd done wrong.

The irony was that all that work had left me no time to spend the money I was earning. I'd been a hamster on a wheel, running and running but never getting anywhere. Accumulating a small savings while my apartment stayed sparse, my wardrobe stayed stale, my life stayed small.

Now, with the campaign providing a stable income and a predictable schedule, I had something I hadn't had in months: time.

Time to go to the hairdresser. Time to meet Tui and Hong for dinner at a place that wasn't the cheapest option on the street. Time to wander through a shopping center and actually buy things I wanted, not just things I needed. Time to sit in my apartment with a cup of tea and watch the resurrection plant on my desk continue

its slow unfurling.

It was disorienting, honestly. I'd grown so accustomed to the constant hustle that stillness felt almost suspicious. Like I was forgetting something. Like there was a deadline I was missing, a disaster I wasn't preventing. But there wasn't. There was just life, moving at a pace I could actually sustain.

Today was a product shoot.

I'd arrived at the studio early—force of habit, or maybe just eagerness. The space was already humming with activity when I pushed through the doors, the particular energy of a production day filling the air. Equipment cases lined the walls. Lighting rigs stood ready, their stands like patient soldiers waiting for orders. The backdrop was already set up—a gradient of blues and teals that would eventually be punctuated with splashes of color.

The products themselves were arranged on a side table, waiting for their moment. Lipsticks in shades that ranged from soft coral to electric pink. Eyeshadow palettes with names like "Monsoon" and "Water Lily" and "Celebration." Mascaras promising to survive anything the festival could throw at them. Each item was beautiful in its own right—carefully designed packaging, colors that caught the light, the particular aesthetic of a brand that understood its audience. But they were also just objects. Things to be photographed. Items on a shot list that needed to be checked off before we could move on.

I found myself grateful for my previous work.

All those restaurant shoots. All those product photos for brands I'd forgotten the moment the invoice was paid. All those hours of learning how to make ordinary things look extraordinary, how to find the angle that transformed and the lighting that elevated. I'd hated that work sometimes—found it soulless, repetitive, a far cry from the meaningful photography I'd dreamed about as a student. But now, standing in this professional studio with its proper equipment and its competent team, I realized how much I'd learned from it.

The skills had accumulated without my noticing. The instincts had sharpened through repetition. And now, when it mattered, when I had the chance to create something truly beautiful, I had the technical foundation to actually do it.

Funny how that worked. The terrible job had been training all along.

The other photographer's name was Mint. She was a few years older than me, with the easy confidence of someone who'd been doing this long enough to trust her own instincts. We'd met briefly during the initial meetings, exchanged professional pleasantries, but this was the first time we'd actually be working side by side.

"Product shots first," she said, reviewing the schedule on her tablet. "Then we help

with the commercial setup. Should take about five hours total, if nothing goes sideways."

"And if something does go sideways?"

She grinned. "Then we adapt. That's the job."

The assistants were already moving, arranging the first setup. Our hand model—a young woman with elegant fingers and nails painted in the day's first color—was getting final touches from the makeup team. The specialized staff moved with the particular efficiency of people who did this constantly, who knew exactly how to prep a product for its close-up, how to handle it without leaving fingerprints, how to make it look effortless when it was anything but.

I found my position, adjusted my camera settings, and fell into the rhythm of the work.

Click. Adjust. Click again.

The lipstick needed a slight rotation to catch the light properly. The eyeshadow palette looked better at a lower angle, shadows creating depth in the color wells. The mascara wand required a particular precision—too straight and it looked clinical, too angled and it looked messy.

Mint and I developed a wordless communication as the hours passed. She'd gesture toward something she'd noticed; I'd nod and adjust. I'd spot an issue with a reflection; she'd shift the softbox without being asked. We were two professionals doing professional work, and there was something deeply satisfying about that simplicity.

No drama. No emotional complexity. No trying to decode someone's silence or wondering if I'd said the wrong thing. Just the work, and the team, and the steady accumulation of beautiful images.

The hand model was patient. Her name was Joy—or at least, that's what she went by on set. She held positions for longer than should have been comfortable, her fingers arranged just so around a compact or a brush or a bottle. When she needed a break, she'd say so quietly, flex her hands for a moment, then return to her perfect stillness.

I found myself studying the way she worked. The control she had over her own body. The ability to be both present and absent—there, in the frame, but not really a person. Just a canvas for the products, a vehicle for the brand's vision. It was a strange kind of modeling. Anonymous, in a way. No one would ever know her face from these photos. They'd only see her hands, and even those would be secondary to the products she was showcasing.

"You're good at this." I said during one of the brief breaks, as she flexed her fingers and rolled her wrists.

She smiled—the first real expression I'd seen from her since the shoot started. "Practice. And good moisturizer."

I laughed, surprised by the joke. "Trade secrets?"

"Something like that." She held up her hands, examining them with the clinical eye of someone who viewed her own body as a tool. "People don't realize how much work goes into making hands look effortless. The cuticle care, the nail maintenance, the constant moisturizing. It's a whole routine."

"Worth it?"

She shrugged. "It pays the bills. And there are worse ways to spend a day than sitting in a nice studio while people take pictures of you holding pretty things."

There was a pragmatism to her that I found refreshing. No pretense about the glamour of the industry, no self-aggrandizing stories about her "craft." Just honest acknowledgment that this was a job, and she was good at it, and that was enough.

I wondered if I'd ever develop that kind of peace with my own work. The ability to show up, do the thing, go home—without attaching existential significance to every shot, every session, every creative choice. Maybe that was another kind of healing. Learning that not everything had to be profound.

By hour three, we'd moved through most of the product lineup. The shot list was steadily being checked off. Lipsticks: complete. Eyeshadow palettes: complete. Mascaras: complete. Foundation and concealer: complete. Now we were on to the more creative shots—the ones that would be used for social media, for advertisements, for the kind of visual storytelling that made people want to buy things they didn't know they needed.

This was where the Songkran theme really came into play.

The art director—a woman who had strong opinions and the talent to back them up—had been clear about the vision from the beginning. Modern. Colorful. Joyful. The feeling of celebration without the literal depiction of the festival. We weren't going to show water guns and crowded streets and the chaos of the actual event. We were going to capture the essence—the brightness, the energy, the sense of breaking free from the ordinary.

"More blue," Pim said, examining the current setup. "The coral is getting lost against that background. We need contrast."

The assistants scrambled to adjust. Gels were swapped out. The backdrop shifted from teal to a deeper blue, almost oceanic. Suddenly the coral products popped,

their warmth standing out against the cool tones like life asserting itself.

I adjusted my settings and started shooting again.

There was something meditative about this work. The narrow focus. The technical precision. The way my entire world contracted to the frame in front of me, all the noise of life falling away until there was nothing but light and color and composition.

Click. Check. Adjust. Click again.

The images were good. I could tell even without careful review—that instinct I'd developed over years of shooting, the one that told me when a frame was working and when it wasn't. These were working. They were vibrant without being garish. Professional without being sterile. Beautiful in a way that felt fresh, modern, aligned with what the brand was trying to achieve.

I was earning this money. That realization landed somewhere warm in my chest. Not pride, exactly—though maybe a little of that too. More like... validation. Proof that I belonged here, that I deserved this opportunity, that my skills were worth what they were paying me. The restaurant shoots hadn't been wasted time. The struggle hadn't been pointless. It had all been leading here, to this moment, to this studio where I was part of something larger than myself.

The commercial setup began around hour four. The product shots were done—carefully saved, backed up, already being previewed by Pim on her monitor with satisfied nods. Now the production shifted gears, transforming from still photography to video. Different equipment. Different lighting considerations. Different energy entirely.

Our job was to help with the lighting setup. This wasn't unusual—photographers often assisted with video work when the same products and aesthetics were being captured across both formats. It made sense to maintain consistency, to use the same understanding of how the colors read under different lighting conditions.

The commercial would demonstrate the products' waterproof qualities. A key selling point for a Songkran-themed makeup line—the ability to survive the festival's famous water fights without running, smearing, or fading. The concept was simple but effective: apply the makeup, subject it to water, show that it stayed perfect.

The video crew had their own setup—cameras and rigs and monitors that spoke a slightly different language than my still photography equipment. But the fundamentals were the same. Light and color and composition. The story you were trying to tell.

I helped adjust the main key light, angling it to minimize unwanted reflections while still catching the water droplets that would be the star of certain shots. Mint was working on the fill, her experience with video work evident in the small adjustments

she made, the considerations she raised that I wouldn't have thought of.

"Watch the backslash," she said to one of the video assistants. "When the water hits, it's going to scatter. You need to protect that lens." Professional details. The kind of knowledge that came from experience, from having things go wrong before and learning how to prevent them.

When the commercial crew started filming, I stepped back to watch. This wasn't my domain—but there was something fascinating about seeing the products come to life in a different medium. The way movement added dimension. The way sound (though it would likely be replaced in editing) created atmosphere. The way a model's expression could shift the entire feeling of a shot in a way that was impossible in stills.

The model for the commercial was different from our hand model. A young woman with a face made for cameras—symmetrical features, expressive eyes, the kind of bone structure that caught light beautifully. She sat still while the makeup team applied the products, then turned toward the camera with a smile that somehow managed to feel genuine despite being performed.

Then came the water. Not a lot at first—just mist, delicate droplets catching the light like scattered diamonds. The model moved through the spray, her expression shifting from surprised to delighted, the kind of pantomime emotion that looked silly in real life but would read perfectly on screen. Then more water. A splash, carefully controlled, hitting her face at an angle designed to maximize visual impact while minimizing actual chaos. The makeup held. Of course it held—that was the entire point—but there was still something satisfying about seeing the proof.

The colors stayed vibrant. The lines stayed sharp. Even as water ran down her face, even as the droplets caught the studio lights and sparkled, the products remained intact.

Waterproof. Long-lasting. Festival-ready.

The crew captured it from multiple angles, multiple takes, multiple variations. Mint and I adjusted lighting as needed, responding to the director's requests, maintaining consistency across setups. It was collaborative work—everyone contributing their piece to the larger puzzle. By the time they called the final take, we'd been in the studio for almost five hours.

Wrapping up was its own kind of ritual. Equipment to pack. Lights to power down. The careful dismantling of everything we'd spent hours building. I moved through it automatically, my body performing the familiar motions while my mind drifted.

The session had been good. Not just technically—though it had been that too, the images and footage captured exactly what the client wanted—but personally. I'd shown up. I'd done the work. I'd been part of a team, contributed my skills, earned



my place. No drama. No emotional spiraling. No moments where I'd lost myself in memories of William or wondered what he was doing or felt the old familiar ache of longing for someone who couldn't love me back.

Just five hours of colorful, professional, meaningful work. This is what it feels like, I thought, packing my camera into its case. This is what it feels like to be present in your own life. To be here, fully here, instead of always somewhere else in your head. The resurrection plant on my desk at home was probably still unfurling. I'd checked it that morning before leaving—more green visible now, more of the brown curled leaves loosening their grip, more evidence of life returning where death had seemed certain.

I was doing the same thing. Unfurling. Uncurling. Remembering what it felt like to be alive.

Mint caught my eye across the studio and gave me a thumbs up. "Good work today."

"You too."

Simple words. Simple acknowledgment. But it meant something—to be part of a team, to be recognized for contributing, to exist in a space where your presence was wanted.

I finished packing and headed for the door.

Outside, Bangkok was already shifting into evening mode—the light going golden, the street vendors setting up, the particular energy of a city preparing for night. I stood on the sidewalk for a moment, breathing in the familiar smells of exhaust and food and flowers from somewhere, and felt something I hadn't felt in a long time.

Content. Not ecstatic. Not triumphant. Nothing as dramatic as that. Just... content. Satisfied with the day. Grateful for the work. Looking forward to going home, where a resurrection plant waited on my desk and a clean apartment welcomed me and a life—my life, not the shadow of someone else's—was slowly, carefully, cell by cell, coming back to green. I checked my phone. A message from Tui asking if I wanted to grab dinner tomorrow. A notification about my next therapy appointment. The mundane details of an ordinary life. I smiled, pocketed the phone, and started walking home.

The morning had started earlier than usual.

Not because I'd set my alarm with extra time—though I had—but because I'd woken before it went off. My body alert, my mind already running through the day ahead. The kind of anticipation that used to manifest as anxiety but now felt more like excitement. A fine distinction, maybe, but an important one.

I'd laid out my clothes the night before. It sounds obsessive, The kind of thing you do when you're a teenager heading to your first job interview, not a professional photographer with years of experience. But I'd learned something about myself in recent weeks: preparation was a form of self-care. When I took the time to plan, to organize, to set myself up for success, the day went smoother. The anxiety stayed quieter.

The outfit was simple but considered. Dark jeans that fit well and allowed movement—I'd be on my feet for hours, bending and crouching and adjusting angles. A fitted black t-shirt, quality fabric that wouldn't wrinkle or show sweat. A lightweight jacket I could take off when the studio lights made things warm. Comfortable shoes with good support.

Professional without being stiff. Practical without being sloppy. The kind of clothes that said I take this seriously without screaming I'm trying too hard.

I didn't want to look out of place. The models would be beautiful—that was their job, their currency. The makeup artists would be stylish, creative types with an eye for aesthetics that extended to their own presentation. My colleagues would be dressed in the particular uniform of creative professionals: intentionally casual, subtly expensive, effortlessly cool. And I wanted to fit. Not to impress anyone, necessarily. Just to belong.

The commute was familiar now. Same bus route I'd taken for the product session and the commercial shoot. Same buildings scrolling past the window, same stops where the same types of people got on and off. The morning rush was still in full swing, bodies pressed together in that particular intimacy of public transit, but I'd snagged a seat near the window and could watch the city wake up around me.

My backpack sat on my lap, lighter than usual. Everything else was already at the studio—my camera equipment, the specialized lenses, the accessories I might need. We'd left them secured in the equipment room after the last session, and the studio had better storage than my apartment anyway. Better climate control, better security, better everything.

So today I was traveling light. Just the essentials. Phone, keys, wallet. The small things you never left home without, the items that lived in your pockets like extensions of yourself. It felt strange, actually. I was so used to the weight of my camera bag, the familiar pressure against my shoulder, the way it anchored me in space. Without it, I felt almost naked. Exposed.

But also free. There was something liberating about showing up to work without carrying everything on your back. About trusting that what you needed would be there waiting for you. About being part of a system that functioned, a team that had your back.

The lobby was already busy when I arrived. That particular energy of a production day—people moving with purpose, conversations happening in clusters, the sense of something about to happen. I pushed through the glass doors and felt the shift immediately, the transition from ordinary morning to creative endeavor.

And there was Nut, talking to a group of young men I didn't recognize—probably crew members, or maybe some of the models checking in early. His hands were moving as he spoke, that characteristic animation that made everything he said feel urgent and important. When he spotted me crossing the lobby, his face broke into a grin.

"Est!" He extracted himself from the conversation with practiced ease, already moving toward me. "Perfect timing."

"I try."

We fell into step together, heading for the elevators. The morning light from the lobby windows caught him in profile, and I noticed he looked more put-together than usual—shirt actually ironed, hair actually styled, the kind of effort you made when you knew important things were happening.

"Let's hope this session goes smoothly like the last one," he said, jabbing the elevator button with unnecessary force. Nervous energy, barely contained.

"It will."

"You sound confident."

"I am." The elevator doors opened and we stepped inside. "The prep work was solid. The team knows what they're doing. The products photograph well. What's left to worry about?"

Nut laughed, that slightly manic sound of someone who was definitely still worrying about everything. "You say that like there aren't a thousand things that could go wrong."

"There are always a thousand things that could go wrong. That's true of every shoot. But we'll handle them."

He looked at me sideways as the elevator climbed. "When did you get so zen?"

I thought about it. About therapy and resurrection plants and the slow process of unfurling. About learning to be present instead of catastrophizing about futures that might never happen. "Recently," I said. "It's a work in progress."

The studio was already active when we arrived. Even though we were technically early—thirty minutes before the official call time—people were already there. Setting up. Preparing. Moving through the space with the purposeful energy of

professionals who knew that early wasn't actually early, it was just on time.

I dropped my backpack in the designated area and immediately made my way toward the lights.

The main setup was partially assembled from our previous sessions, but today's shoot required adjustments. Different moods, different looks, different products being featured. The art director's vision for this session emphasized dramatic lighting—more contrast, more shadow, more of the kind of intentional darkness that made colors pop.

"Hey," said one of the lighting assistants—a young woman named Fah who I'd worked with during the product shoot. "Glad you're here. I'm second-guessing this key light position."

I studied the setup, reading the angles. "Move it about fifteen degrees left. You're catching too much of the backdrop."

She adjusted. I nodded. "Better."

It was collaborative work, the kind I'd come to appreciate. No egos, no territoriality. Just a group of people trying to make something beautiful, each contributing their piece of expertise. I helped with the background next—a massive canvas that needed to be positioned precisely, its gradient of colors calibrated to complement the products and models we'd be featuring. The crew worked together, tugging and adjusting, stepping back to check, adjusting again. Small refinements that would make the difference between good and great.

More people arrived as we worked. Makeup artists with their rolling cases of products. Stylists with racks of accessories. Other photographers checking their equipment. The assistant director with her clipboard and her perpetually furrowed brow, keeping track of a dozen moving pieces. The studio filled with voices and movement and the particular hum of creation about to happen.

Nut gathered everyone when the call time officially arrived. We clustered near the main shooting area—maybe twenty people in total, a mix of crew and creative team. The models weren't here yet; they were still in the makeup room, being transformed into whatever vision the art director had decreed.

Nut stood at the front, and I could see the nervousness radiating off him despite his attempts to appear calm. His hands were stuffed in his pockets, probably to stop them from fidgeting. His smile was a shade too bright.

"Thank you all for today," he said, his voice carrying across the studio. "Let's hope everything goes smoothly."

A few murmurs of agreement. Some nodded.

"If anything happens, we'll fix it as a group." He paused, seeming to gather himself. "I know this is a new project. The biggest one for many of you." His laugh was slightly nervous, self-deprecating. "Even for me, honestly. It's my first long project since I started as an intern."

That got some surprised looks. Nut had always seemed so confident, so in control, that it was easy to forget he was still relatively new to leadership.

"Good luck," he finished. "All of us. Let's make something amazing."

Some of the crew laughed as they dispersed—not at him, but with him. The words had done something to the atmosphere, releasing tension that had been building since people started arriving. Acknowledging that everyone was a little nervous, a little uncertain, somehow made it easier to move forward.

Very Nut, I thought, watching him head toward the door that connected to the makeup room and waiting area. He had that power—the ability to say the thing that needed saying, to create space for others to be human. It was a pleasure to have him as a boss.

I returned to my position near the main camera setup. The other photographers were doing the same—Mint at her station, two others whose names I was still learning at theirs. We'd each have our angles, our assignments, our specific moments to capture. The choreography of a multi-photographer shoot was complex, but we'd rehearsed it during the prep sessions.

I checked my equipment one more time. Camera body: ready. Lens: clean and properly attached. Settings: calibrated for the lighting we'd established. Memory cards: formatted and empty, waiting to be filled.

Everything was in order.

The studio had settled into that particular quiet that preceded action. The crew at their stations. The lights humming softly. The backdrop ready. The air conditioned to the precise temperature that kept both equipment and people comfortable.

Waiting.

I thought about all the shoots I'd done before. The restaurants where I'd photographed food that would be eaten and forgotten. The influencers who'd posed and preened for images that would scroll past in seconds. The small commercial jobs that paid the bills but never quite satisfied.

This was different.

This was a proper campaign. A major brand. Images that would be seen by thousands, maybe millions. Work that would appear on billboards and in magazines and across the internet, representing something larger than any individual session.

And I was part of it.

Not despite my history of struggle, but maybe because of it. All those hours of practice, all those mediocre jobs, all that grinding—it had prepared me for this moment. Had given me the skills to be here, to contribute, to belong.

The resurrection plant on my desk at home was probably still unfurling.

So was I.

The door to the makeup room opened. I straightened slightly, my hand going automatically to my camera, my focus sharpening from diffuse readiness to active attention. Around me, I felt the rest of the crew doing the same—that collective intake of breath, that shift in energy.

The session was beginning. The first model emerged, and the studio seemed to contract around her—everyone's attention drawn to this single point of beauty and purpose. She was young, maybe twenty, with a face that had been transformed by the makeup team into something almost otherworldly. The products we'd spent days photographing were now living on skin, demonstrated in their intended context.

Bold colors. Precise lines. The kind of dramatic look that would pop on camera, that was designed not for everyday life but for the particular reality of professional photography.

Behind her, the stylists fluttered—adjusting a strap here, smoothing fabric there, ensuring every detail was perfect before she stepped in front of the cameras.

"Position one," the art director called. "Let's start with the main key shot."

The model moved to her mark, years of training evident in the way she found her light without being directed. Her expression shifted from the blank neutrality of transit to something more—confidence, allure, the particular performance of beauty that modeling required.

I raised my camera.

The viewfinder framed her perfectly—the lighting we'd so carefully arranged now doing its job, sculpting her features, making the colors of the makeup sing against her skin. The backdrop provided context without distraction. Every element we'd prepared was working together.

Click.

The shutter sound was satisfying, final, the capture of a moment.

Click. Click. Click.

I moved through my angles, documenting what we'd created. The other photographers were doing the same, each of us gathering our own harvest of images from this single setup. Later, someone would sort through hundreds of photos to find the dozen that would actually be used. But that was later. Right now, there was only the work.

"Beautiful." someone said—the art director, I thought, though I was too focused to really register. Beautiful. Yes. It was.

And I was here, making it. Part of the team. Part of the creation.

The session had begun.